

Iowan who met Gorbachev glad he rose so high

By KEN FUSON

Register Staff Writer

An Iowa banker who expects to meet with Mikhail Gorbachev this summer describes the new Soviet leader as a pragmatic, straightforward man whose agricultural expertise may result in increased trade with the United States.

John Chrystal, president and chief executive officer of Bankers Trust Co. in Des Moines, has met twice with Gorbachev, providing him with a perspective unmatched by most Western officials.

The 54-year-old Gorbachev was named Monday as general secretary of the Communist Party. He succeeds Konstantin Chernenko, 75, who died Sunday.

"I'm happy that he is the general secretary," Chrystal said of Gorbachev.

Chrystal said he believes Gorbachev will promote changes to bolster the Soviet Union's ailing economy. "If I were going to appraise him, I would think that he probably thinks good economics is good politics," he says.

Those changes, he said, could include increased American trade, which ultimately would help American agriculture. "I would think that's a possibility," he said. "I think he's a very pragmatic man."

The Soviet leader, he adds, may have less of an impact on foreign relations and arms control talks, because many of those decisions are made by a committee....

But Shirley Williams, co-founder and president of the Social Democratic Party of Great Britain and a visiting professor at Grinnell College, believes the ascension of Gorbachev offers hope for improving East-West relations.



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"I think it does give us a fresh opportunity," said Williams, who met for about two hours with Gorbachev last December.

Chrystal, who has made more than a dozen trips to the Soviet Union, said he has been invited to return to the Kremlin this July and expects to meet with Gorbachev. Asked if Gorbachev invited him, Chrystal replied: "I think indirectly."

The two men, who share an agricultural background, are hardly strangers. In fact, one Russian leader told Chrystal he was the first American to have an extended conversation with the man who now leads the Soviet Union. And, in the past, the Central Intelligence Agency has interviewed Chrystal regarding his conversations in Moscow.

Chrystal first met Gorbachev in 1981 at the Communist Party Central Committee's headquarters in Moscow. They talked for about an hour and a half. The second meeting occurred in November 1983 and lasted about two hours. Agricultural issues dominated the conversations.

The first meeting, Chrystal said last year, "was somewhat formal, with one person speaking, then the other." The 1983 meeting "was much more easy. Half of it had to do with the relationship with the two countries, half with agriculture.

"Several times during the first half of the meeting he said, 'There is still time to find some accord.' He said the United States had once been pre-eminent in the world, both economically and militarily, and that we now must realize that this was no longer the truth, that other countries had grown economically and militarily."

Chrystal said Monday that he has found Gorbachev to be "personable" and forthright, not claiming there was nothing troublesome about Soviet agriculture, because there are troubles."

Williams said Gorbachev met with six members of the Social Democratic Party during his trip to London last December.

"He had an air of considerable confidence," she said, "which led me to believe he knew he was going to be the leader then."

During the meeting, Williams said, Gorbachev proved "extremely responsive and quite easy to exchange views with," except on human rights

issues. "He was pretty sensitive on that issue."

Williams said she believes Gorbachev will closely watch the progress of arms talks in Geneva. Those talks, she said, provide the United States with the opportunity to show a new Soviet leader that it is serious about reducing the number of nuclear missiles.

"His whole style is one that suggests to me that he's going to have more influence than his predecessors," she said. "He's like a first-term president with a pretty certain indication that he's going to be there for the next three or four terms."